

MUSLIM WOMEN STILL EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATION IN KING COUNTY

by Lisa Marquette, King County Office of Civil Rights

On January 29, 2003, a Civil Rights Specialist from King County Office of Civil Rights conducted a workshop for ten women who had immigrated from Somalia. The group included recent immigrants and those who came here as long as eight years ago. The training was focused on providing the group with basic information about civil rights in the United States with special emphasis on housing and employment discrimination. The training was provided with the help of an interpreter and was part of the group's ESL (English as a second language) curriculum. The group consisted mostly of young women, some with children and some single mothers.

The group immediately raised issues about the difficulty in finding and keeping housing, and about discrimination in the work place and in public places since September 11. The women dressed in hijabs, which is thought of in the U.S. as a traditional Muslim garment. One woman who was working in Auburn reported that her co-workers called her "al Qaeda" and "Osama bin Laden." The woman said that her boss told her it wasn't her performance but because of the fact that people were uncomfortable with her, she had to be let go. The Specialist informed her that there was still time to file a discrimination complaint and asked if she wished to do so. The woman replied that at first, she was depressed after being fired, but now she just wanted to forget about it and move on. She felt the treatment was all due to September 11 because she had not been treated badly before that date.

The same woman reported that she had been on the waiting list for a first floor apartment in her government-subsidized apartment building for one year. She lives alone with her five children, and one of her sons had recently fallen out of their third story apartment building. Whenever she asks what is taking so long, the apartment manager says there are no first floor apartments available, yet she sees new families moving into them all the time. The woman feels that the apartment manager doesn't like her and is not helping her because she is Muslim. When asked why she doesn't file a discrimination complaint based on national origin and religion, the woman expressed fear of retaliation and of being thrown out on the street with her five children. The woman stated repeatedly that she is torn between standing up for her rights and her great fear of being evicted if she angered her landlord.

All the women in the group reported being subjected to some kind of negative treatment after September 11 occurred. Some reported being honked at by cars driving by and being called "Osama bin Laden" and "terrorist" on the street. One of the women had been in the U.S. for eight years. She said that before September 11, she loved living in the U.S. because she was free to speak and go about as she pleased. Since September 11, she doesn't go out of her apartment much and is afraid for her children at school. Gesturing around the room, she said "we are innocent people" and wondered how long they would be treated as if they had done something wrong.

The women were asked collectively there was so much reluctance to file civil rights complaints. One woman answered by asking, "Do you have to fight for everything in

America? If discrimination is against the law, shouldn't it just be taken care of?" Raising one's voice for one's self is not something that is encouraged in her country, especially for women. Many are afraid of the consequences of complaining. The language barrier is a big problem as well as not knowing what one's rights are.

The interpreter requested that the training be repeated on a monthly basis and suggested that once the women became familiar with the Specialist, they may be more trusting and therefore willing come forward and file complaints. The group also reported that experiences like theirs were very common among their friends and acquaintances living in King County who are identifiably Muslim.

In July 2001, an event called Justice for ALL: the Aftermath of September 11 was held in Seattle. It served as a forum for people from immigrant communities in the region to give voice to their experiences since September 11. Among those on hand to listen was a collection of high-level elected and appointed government officials. They heard about a variety of different experiences, all with a common thread: The speakers all felt they were targeted because of their national origin, which real or perceived, was largely Arab or Muslim. They spoke of verbal harassment, assault, profiling, detentions, and attempts by government officials to damage or shut down immigrant-owned businesses. Some stories, like name calling and being inexplicably fired from a job, mirrored the experiences by the Somali women, nearly 2½ years after September 11.

Clearly, everyone in King County must be made aware that the ramifications of September 11 are still being felt, and that outreach to those communities most vulnerable must be increased so those who immigrant to the U.S. can feel confident that their civil rights will be protected.

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